



## The Media and the Cycle of Humanitarian Crisis

---

BY: Joelle Tanguy

In southern Sudan this past summer, a dozen children a day were dying before they could reach feeding centers, and no one seemed to know about it.

Joelle Tanguy

As word of the worsening crisis reached us, my colleagues and I in the New York office of Doctors Without Borders/Médecins Sans Frontières called an emergency meeting to discuss why the famine devastating southern Sudan was receiving so little coverage in the U.S. media. Everyone tossed out ideas on how to stimulate American interest in this growing tragedy. But every idea seemed insignificant in relation to the magnitude of the humanitarian disaster we were facing.

Just as our meeting was breaking up, someone in the office shouted, "The U.S. has just bombed Sudan!" In disbelief, we scrambled to turn on radios and call up Web pages. Suddenly Sudan was everywhere. Maps of the nation appeared on the evening news and discussions of Khartoum politics filled the airwaves. A U.S. bombing raid had put Sudan on American television screens. Unfortunately, the only images we saw that evening, and for the next few days, were of smoldering buildings, not starving children.

Mortality rates associated with

the famine in pockets of southern Sudan have equaled levels recorded in Ethiopia during the 1980s. Doctors Without Borders and dozens of other international aid agencies have mounted a huge relief operation (to donate call 888-392-0392). But there has been no public attention paid to this crisis in the United States ... why?

Some in the international aid community blame a phenomenon we refer to as "compassion fatigue." They say that the public has grown numb to the endless stream of needy victims paraded before them on the evening news. Their mailboxes are so over-stuffed with glossy brochures asking for donations to worthy causes that they can no longer empathize with any single instance of human suffering. Emaciated African children too weak to swat away the flies swarming over them have become commonplace; elderly Balkan refugees clothed in rags and huddling under plastic sheeting have become mundane.

The American obsession with scandal is another reason put forth for the current indifference to the famine in Sudan and other humanitarian disasters. Lately, a guaranteed formula for dying in oblivion is to be the victim of a famine, war, or natural disaster that takes place during an

American media feeding frenzy. Coverage of the O.J. Simpson murder investigation pre-empted news of the Rwandan genocide in 1994, and the Monica Lewinsky affair distracted attention away from the famine in Sudan and the refugees in Kosovo. In July, a nurse who had just returned from working in a feeding center in Sudan was sitting in a national television news studio and being fitted with a microphone for an interview when a new twist in the Starr investigation caused the producer to abruptly cancel the segment.

Who decides what the American public wants to see? Are audience preferences driving editorial decisions, or are editorial assumptions about what the public wants to know dictating audience choices?

The primary obstacle standing between the American public and the tragic famine facing the Sudanese people is a lack of information. If people knew that children were walking for days to reach a feeding center, who would not be moved? How can Americans be accused of not caring about those who face starvation when they know nothing about them? In the past—during the famine in Somalia and the refugee crisis in Zaire, for example—Americans have shown their

compassion in remarkable ways.

At the heart of this problem is an alarming decrease in the amount of international news coverage in the United States. According to the Tyndall Report, an independent media monitoring organization, nightly news coverage of overseas stories on the major television networks has declined by nearly 50 percent in the last decade. In August of 1998, CNN halved its daily international news broadcast to thirty minutes.

While global connectivity through satellite newsfeeds and the Internet has rapidly increased, the American media have grown more and more narrow in their approach to the rest of the world. In an article published in the March/April 1997 issue of *Foreign Affairs*, Garrick Utley points out that the passing of the Cold War left American network television in a quandary over how to report international news. "Without stories from abroad that could be presented as part of an overall threat to American security, newscasts suffered a severe loss in an increasingly competitive medium that thrives—perhaps depends—on drama and conflict to attract and hold an audience's attention." The coverage of the recent embassy bombings is a classic example. The bombings of the U.S. embassies in Nairobi and Dar Es Salaam remained front-page news only until the last American victim was recovered, even though Kenyans and

Tanzanians suffered much greater losses.

Still, there remain scores of dedicated journalists willing to risk their lives to hike over perilous roads and past rebel checkpoints to visit medical volunteers working in emergency projects around the globe. They continue to file stories that analyze difficult international issues in subtle and complex ways. Yet only a fraction of the material a journalist sees or hears actually makes it onto the evening news broadcasts or front pages back home. Journalists often complain that if they can't tell a story in a short, simplistic way, it will not get published or aired at all. Either way, stories of aid workers battling disease in Malawi or performing war surgery in Sri Lanka can never compete with O.J. or Monica, leaving the reporters and our project volunteers frustrated and the public uninformed.

While the frustration of aid workers and journalists is only temporary, there are more serious and lasting effects. The decrease in American coverage of international news feeds a lack of U.S. political will that is tolerable only because the public is ignorant of growing international problems that may eventually affect them. By insulating the American public from troubles beyond American borders, the U.S. media are also isolating us from potential environmental, economic, and political crises. Unable to hear foreign voices,

Americans develop a dangerously warped perspective of world events and the position of the United States in relation to them. When Americans are not aware of a famine in Africa, we are also not aware of the political tensions that contributed to it, and the solutions that the world looks to the United States, as the last global superpower, to provide.

In our experience, it is primarily public opinion and awareness of a crisis that bring political solutions. We have learned that the only way to raise public awareness of a potential or ongoing humanitarian crisis is to convince the media to cover a story in a sustained and subtle manner. The famine in Sudan, and, up until recently, the atrocities against ethnic Albanians in Kosovo, did not receive the amount of ongoing media coverage necessary to galvanize popular opinion into pressing for political solutions that could ultimately end these tragedies.

As a fiercely independent non-governmental organization, Doctors Without Borders has worked hard to build a large base of individual supporters so that donor pressure will not impose politically on our operational deployment. But we often ask: can we lose what we have gained in financial independence through our dependency on the media to bring a given crisis to public attention? When the U.S. media's editors ignore Rwanda, the Sudan, or Kosovo in favor of

the extensive coverage they give to scandals like those around O.J. Simpson or Monica Lewinsky, what recourse is left to invite private philanthropy, stir indignation, and stimulate action?

We must demand more of our news media. Editors must allocate more time and space for in-

depth reporting of international news. Readers and listeners must ask to hear the stories that are not being told. Through its exhaustive coverage of the Clinton scandal, the U.S. media have, if nothing else, demonstrated how capable they are of reporting on a complex and continually changing story. Why not turn the same attention to the

causes and solutions for the famine in Sudan or the conflict in Kosovo? If we can successfully aim a Tomahawk missile at a factory in downtown Khartoum, then we can certainly focus camera lenses on the faces of the thousands of starving children in southern Sudan.

---